

# BAYLANDS

## Peregrine Falcons

Few birds of prey command as much awe and respect as the magnificent Peregrine Falcon. Here in the Palo Alto Baylands, sightings of this brilliant predator are increasing. They can sometimes be seen perched on the top of the power line towers in the marsh, scanning for prey. This crow-sized bird of prey is easily identified in the field by its distinctive black sideburns, pointed wings and narrow tail. Adults have a slate colored back and a light chest. Immature Peregrines are brown above and streaked below.

Peregrines mate for life. Courtship begins in late winter and lasts through early Spring. Building their nests on inaccessible cliffs and ledges, females then lay three or four pink eggs. Once the young have hatched, both parents help feed their newborn. Males will often store extra food in a nearby cache in case prey becomes scarce.

Peregrine Falcons prey almost exclusively on other birds. The hunting tactics of this raptor are impressive. Normally, they attack birds in the air by swooping down on them at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour (100 miles per hour average). They strike their victim with talons fully extended. Often the prey is knocked to the ground and then retrieved, but sometimes they swoop down again and catch the falling bird in the air. Less often, the Falcon dives past the bird and attacks it from below.

Occasionally, pairs hunt cooperatively to take larger prey. As in other species of raptors, the female is noticeably larger than the male. She dives first when hunting, eats first, and takes larger prey than the male.

Peregrine Falcons had a troubled existence for many years after World War 2. Widespread use of the pesticide DDT at that time caused the shells of Peregrine eggs to become so thin they broke under the weight of the incubating females. The result was

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a dramatic drop in the U.S. Peregrine population. They were exterminated east of the Mississippi River by 1964, and their numbers plunged in the West and North. In 1969 the Peregrine Falcon was declared an endangered species.

DDT use has been banned in the United States since 1972, and today the Peregrine is making a strong comeback across the country. It has a range more extensive than that of any other bird, though it is still somewhat rare here in the Baylands.

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